**The Horrors of Pink and Blue**

The flowers in the jungle on the outskirts of Khotumpoor dropped their silent tears as dusk laid her loving arms around the small village. The first signs of life emerged from still cottages as a rooster perched on top of a scarecrow let out an insistent morning cry. The inhabitants of these cottages slowly began to leave their homes and make their way to River Santhandarmi.

River Santhandarmi, the pride and joy of the villagers, flowed beside the village, separating them from the horrors of the jungle beyond. Every morning, at the crow of the rooster, all the villagers would walk to the river to pray to the Goddess who resided there, Goddess Santhandhi. First, they would fall to their knees on the banks of the river, bow their head, and in unison sing their daily chant. Then, they would arise, scoop a little of the sacred water into their hands, take a sip of it and quickly let the rest of the water fall back into the river.

When this ritual completed, the villager’s resumed their daily chores. The farmers returned to their farms, milked their cows and harvested their crops. The blacksmiths fixed broken utensils and made shoes for the horses of traders. The cleaners, commonly known as “dhobiwallas,” would take the dirty clothes of the villagers, wash them in a designated area in the river, apply a little soap and then slap the clothes against a hard rock until they were dry. The children would all gather in the Maidan to play endless rounds of cricket. All children except Ritika.

Ritika, a tender young girl at the age of ten, returned with her father to the house to help clean and set up everything for the day’s meals. She took up the empty space her mother had left, cooking all meals, taking care of her younger cousins and keeping her house spotless. Her mother’s disappearance two years earlier had forced her to grow up fast and so, being the eldest of her cousins, she was expected only to cook, clean and care.

Her days normally consisted of waking up at the crack of dawn, finding her way through the crowd to the river, praying, going back home, milking the cow, cleaning the house, and then preparing the meals for her extended family of ten. Every time she saw the ball fly past the window of her cottage, her intelligent green eyes would light up with excitement and for a minute she would forget about the ache for her mother that nestled in her abdomen. On a normal day she would be done cleaning and cooking by noon, take care of her cousins when they took their lunchbreak from cricket, and then, at about five o’clock every day, she would pick up the clothes from the dhobiwallas, carry the baskets home and finally go back to get water for her family. However, December 3rd was not a normal day at all, that’s how she met the Genies in the first place.

Ritika awakened with a beaming chest that morning. She had prayed at the river, made a beeline for home, completed her tasks as fast as she could, dressed in her prettiest salwar, tied her plaits in her prettiest ribbons and then headed straight back to the river.

 If there was one thing Ritika loved, it was flowers. The first thing she remembered about her mother was her delicate hands that had quietly woven alwarul flowers into a wreath with Ritika watching her. Ritika had been sitting in the corner of the room eating a fruit that stained her face purple. When her mother finished, Ritika had padded up to her curiously and watched as those same hands softly placed the halo of flowers on her head.

“Phool,” her mother had said, pointing at the flowers. That was the first word Ritika had learnt.

Ritika knew where Khotumpoor’s most beautiful flowers grew. When she walked straight from the door of her house, she would reach the River. If she walked parallel to the river up to the single banyan tree on the first hill, she would see a bulky log spread across the river forming a footbridge. Now, if she would tiptoe across the log, just as Ritika did that day, she could find the prettiest flowers one could imagine.

Ritika sat on the bank of the river, playing with the flowers on December 3rd, her birthday, when everything changed. She sat right opposite the Maidan so she had the privilege of watching the current cricket match live. Her face was alight with happiness. She felt a raw kind of bliss and so when the ball flew her way a few minutes later and fell into the woods, she did not think twice about getting up and retrieving the ball.

The villagers avoided the jungle like the deer avoided tigers. They believed that all the world’s horrors resided in those woods and if one would go inside, he would never return. It was the Devil’s habitat and he devoured every soul that passed through the single ring of banyan trees that flanked the outskirts of Khotumpoor. It was common knowledge that if one went in, they are not wanted back in the village because of the irrational fear the villagers had of the demon that would have fused with the trespasser. Ritika had conveniently forgotten these fears when she entered the dense banyan boundary on December 3rd.

She passed through the close-knit clump of trees to find herself in an open space, encircled by trees. The ground was parched and famished and longed for sunlight and water. The air was thick with humidity and Ritika scrunched up her nose at the smell of the mugginess.

 The bright red cricket ball lay precisely in the middle of the circle. Ritika walked toward it, oblivious to the sense of supernatural around her. She was about to bend down and scoop up the ball when suddenly the ball rolled with full speed toward a huge tree. Ritika stood stunned for a moment, reckoned it was just an odd gust of wind that had moved the ball and followed the ball farther into the woods. Having arrived at the tree where the ball lay, she reached down for the ball again, but this time it flew into the air. She stood up straight and took a nervous step backwards. She watched as the ball flew through the air to the other side of the clearing and then flew back, as if game ‘Catch the Ball’ was being played.

“Wh-who’s there?” her voice was so tight and soft as if she was speaking to herself. The ball continued to move to and fro as if throwing itself from one side to the other.

“Who’s there?” she asked again, louder and clearer, her voice at the edge of shouting.

“Tell me who you are!” She trembled with fear.

“It’s only us silly!” a melancholy voice called out seemingly from where the ball was. “It’s just us.”

Ritika’s jaw dropped as two figures materialized in the thin air. Both figures looked identical, both fairly human shaped, tall and plump. They wore what looked like jumpsuits with stripes on them. Both wore sock hats that looked like a nightcap and floated just an inch above the ground. The only difference Ritika could find between them was that the one with the ball breathed out blue smoke and the other one breathed out a light pink smoke.

“Well, you found us. Now we have to make two of your wishes come true,” said the one breathing blue clouds showing a surprisingly sarcastic voice that was deep and manlike. *Whatever do they mean?* Ritika thought.

The blue one threw the ball at Ritika. “We’re Genies silly. You can’t leave until you ask for your wishes.” *Genies?* Thought Ritika. *Genies are good. They help make your dreams come true. There’s no reason to be afraid*. Her thrashing heartbeat slowed.

The Pink Genie cleared her throat loudly. “Well…?” she asked in a husky voice. Ritika looked at them both blankly, nervously twisting the ball in her hands.

“Your wishes?” prompted the nicer Pink Genie.

Ritika thought for a moment; she squinted her eyes as she remembered the things most important to her. There were only two things that she really wanted.

“Well, my first wish is that I want to play cricket,” she said dubiously.

The Genies’ eyes shone looking expectantly at Ritika as she gave them another blank look.

“You sure do specialize in blank looks, don’t you?” The Blue Genie laughed haughtily in his deep voice.

“What position, silly?” The Pink Genie prompted.

“I want to bat,” she continued, her excitement finally jumping into her lap. “And my second wish is to see my mother.” She said this so fast, that she had to repeat it again for it to make any sense to the Genies.

“Your wish is our command.” Both the genies bowed gracefully and disappeared as unexpectedly as they had appeared.

Ritika walked back to the village wondering if she had imagined the entire encounter. *Maybe it was dehydration causing hallucinations*, she thought to herself. Soon after, she saw a big smile floating in the air at a distance, which she swore looked exactly like the smile of the Blue Genie. She pinched herself to make sure she wasn’t dreaming as she crossed the log footbridge.

*You are not dreaming, silly.* The voice of the Blue Genie filled her thoughts.

All of a sudden, she couldn’t control herself. Was she really going to be able to play real cricket? And what about her mother, would she really meet her? She couldn’t stop the excited squeal that left her lips. She hadn’t felt this hopeful for a long time. She skipped all the way to the *Maidan*; not noticing the change that had occurred between the time she had entered the jungle and now.

Ritika sprinted back to the village excited and waiting to tell the others about what had happened. Her plaits flew behind her as she ran in to the Maidan. But, when she got there, she skidded to a halt. She looked around her. The Maidan was completely empty; not a soul in sight, nor a bat or ball. The grassy Maidan was so silent that it seemed as if the entire village had gone for vacation. Ritika walked near the cricket pitch. *Where was everyone?* She stood in front of the stumps, the highest point in the Maidan, and strained her neck, trying to see if the children were messing with her. All of a sudden, she heard a rustle in the bushes near by.

“*Koi hai kya* – is anyone here?” she called out. The bushes began to shiver. *Maybe it’s just the wind.* Then, from behind the bushes, she heard a strange sound. A sound she had only heard once when her father had taken her to the city – the sound of a machine firing up. Instantaneously, a cricket ball shot out of the bushes right towards Ritika.

“Ahh!” she screamed, ducking as another ball flew her way. She ran to the side, away from the balls, but it seemed like they were following her. *What was happening?* She had no bat to defend herself from the berserk balls and she was about to reach the bank of River Santhandhi. She skidded in the fertile muck at the edge of the River, both her legs in front of her. If the balls hit her head with such speed, she knew her skull would crack. She fell onto her back, covering herself and her favorite alwar with black, wet mud. She continued to slide, the mud taking her away on its path. Then, she was violently thrown into the river.

No one was allowed in the river, especially with mud all over them. These rules existed for two reasons; first the River was the holy residence of the Goddess. Second, the River was so strong with the power of the Goddess, that once inside it would push one away from the village into foreign lands.

Ritika shut her eyes as water splashed onto her face. She tried to open her mouth to call for help but the current pulled her back into the water the moment she managed to get her face away from the rushing rapids. The currents shoved her across the river away from the village. Now even if she did manage to call out for help, there would be no one to hear her. Her shoulders were sore from battling the waters. She could hardly breathe and could not hear a thing as the water filled her ears. She tired quickly and stopped resisting the pull of the current that was sucking her down the river, threatening to drown her. As she sank deeper into the water no longer able to breathe, she suddenly felt everything become calm around her. As she surfaced gasping for air, she gradually realized that the river had emptied into a lake.

Ritika managed to drag herself out of the water. As she reached the bank, she collapsed there onto her back and waited for her breathing to slow. She tried to rub her eyes in a vain attempt to stop them from burning, but her hands were too heavy and fell to her sides constantly. The water dripped off her clothes wetting the soil underneath her. She closed her eyes in exhaustion, letting her long eyelashes rest on her cheeks when all of a sudden she heard a barely audible rustle.

*Not another machine*,she thought. Opening her eyes, she looked to one side. In the distance, she saw someone sitting under a banyan tree, seemingly fast asleep. *Help!* She thought. *Help was here.* She got up instantaneously in hope for assistance. She walked towards the slumbering shape under the tree, her back sticky with mud and her head heavy with the weight of her wet tresses. Suddenly, something caught her eye: Slung around the neck of the person under the tree, was a thin silver chain with a half-heart diamond locket. Ritika brushed her muddy fingers across her neck. There dangled the other half of the same necklace.

“Ma!” she screamed, running towards her long lost mother, her heart pounding with excitement. Her wet feet imprinted the ground as she ran her fastest, forgetting about the heavy plaits. She did not notice the foul smell that filled the air as she inched towards the resting figure.

“Ma!” she crouched in front of her, reaching out to shake her awake. Her mother’s body, limp and lifeless, crumpled forward, falling face down to the ground with a heavy thud.

“Be careful what you wish for, silly”.

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